

## Autumn Ensemble

HIGUCHI ICHIIY

*The daughter of an erstwhile samurai, Higuchi Ichii (1872–1896) was born in the midst of the upheavals of the Meiji period and died before those upheavals were truly over. Despite a precarious financial situation, her parents sent her to a local teacher for poetry lessons, and in time she also apprenticed herself to a popular novelist. In 1895 and early 1896, she published a handful of stories that are now very much part of the modern canon, all of them about city people in the poorer areas of Tokyo. Praised by luminaries such as Mori gai (1862–1922) and Kda Rohan (1867–1947), Ichii was for a brief time a celebrity of sorts in the literary world and seemed poised for a stellar career. But then she fell prey to consumption, which had carried off her brother and probably her father as well. As she notes in one of the essays translated here, she was at first troubled with headaches and fatigue, which were followed soon by the more debilitating problems that hastened her death.*

*In addition to stories, Ichii left a diary, poems, and a number of essays, including the following four short pieces published as a group under the title Akiawase (Autumn Ensemble) in the year of her death*

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Ah, these headaches—they make these last days seem a dream. Outside, from summer growth as thick as the world's troubles, I hear the first cuckoo of the year. Yet here I am, putting together an ensemble from last autumn,<sup>1</sup> chagrined to see morning dew on the leaves of bamboo shoots shining new after casting off layers of bark.

### Rainy Nights

How tall the leaves of the plantain in my garden have grown! Five feet above the fence, no doubt. I wonder how this can be, when earlier this very year I was saying how short the plant was; but then I recall my amazement last summer at how much it would grow over just two or three days of intense heat. Autumn winds begin to blow, the leaves start to fray at the edges, and as they appear more and more ragged, the sound of rain on the leaves seems all the more moving. So fine is the rainfall that it doesn't block out the sound of crickets in the grasses, but as the wind gains in intensity I am dismayed to think of the damage it will do.

Rain in any season makes me feel low; but it's in autumn that it strikes the hardest. Night deepens, the lamplight seems more somber, and on a night when I am unable to sleep it seems so futile to go to bed that I pick up the paper box I keep scraps in and end up taking out my needles. When I was small, the woman who taught me sewing used to complain about the stitching of my collars and skirts, and I was so afraid that I would never succeed in learning correctly that I went off to pray daily at a nearby shrine. But now that is a long time ago. The teacher is in her grave; the student has forgotten almost everything. On rare occasions when I do try to sew, my fingertips seem stiff and I wonder how disappointed my teacher would be to see how clumsy I look as I proceed.

Thinking back on those days, I am nearly moved to tears despite myself. The rain that seems to be walking toward me from so far away, the noise of shutters being closed nearby—how can such things not make one feel forlorn? And on such a night, how despondent I feel when, preparing to massage my mother's skinny shoulders, I reach out and feel her aging bones.

### Moonlit Nights

If there are clumps of clouds, fine; if not, fine too. Sitting in moonlight so bright that it seems to have

been buffed to a high sheen, one hears the sound of a flute—a delight if the musician is really good. Likewise if one hears a samisen. And when I hear a koto from across the fence in the direction of Nishikata-machi,<sup>2</sup> it seems so like something from an old romance that I want to get a glimpse of who it might be playing there in the moonlight.

How hard it is to find comfort in the moonlight after parting from a close friend! You think of the person looking up at the same moon far away, but since you can't go along, you feel only resentment, and then silly thoughts begin occurring to you, like making the moon for just a moment into a mirror. The reflection bobbing on the surface of the little pond in the garden seems to speak to you, and as you lean over the railing, staring down into the water, the image that before seemed to be floating on the surface now seems to be deeper and deeper down, leaving you feeling as if the pond had limitless depths and that the moon must reside at the very bottom. Then, after a long time looking down, you look up and find that you can't decide which moon is real—the one in the sky or the one in the water.

It was a foolish thing to do, but I once picked up a stone from our miniature garden and dropped it into the pond, which produced little waves for the moonlight to float upon. Seeing me do this, my little nephew decided to mimic me, so *he* took up an inkstone that he had managed to get his hands on, said, "I'm going to do just what Auntie did—I'm going to smash the moon!" and proceeded to toss it into the pond. The inkstone was something passed down from my dead brother<sup>3</sup>—something I had always treasured—and I feel guilty having lost it in such a senseless way. We talked about dredging the pond, but it remains as ever. The next day, the moon was gone into the sky, vanished without a trace. I think of what has become of the inkstone and wonder if every night it waits for the moonlight to appear.

On a moonlit night, one is happy to have a visitor—maybe someone one has not been all that close to who is kind enough to drop by. A man is all right, but one is happier if the visitor is a woman. And if it is difficult for her to come out, she can always send a letter. Someone trying to play the poet is tiresome, but on such a night the exchange of a single word can make a treasured friend. The sound of a peddler out on the street, the distant echo of a boat whistle—such things, too, somehow take one's spirit away.

## Wild Geese Calling

Dawn moonlight lingers in the sky as you wake from a dream, still unsure whether you have returned to reality; and when you open the rain shutters, you see a sudden gust of wind strike the bamboo leaves, sending the dewdrops scattering and striking your body with a chill. And just then it happens: you hear, descending from above, the call of a wild goose, a forlorn enough thing when you spy a whole flock, but even more so if you see just one. If you are thinking of a loved one far off in the provinces, someone from whom you have been waiting day and night for some correspondence,<sup>4</sup> you wonder sadly about what he might be thinking.

How delightful it is to hear—out of sight—the voices of wild geese calling from gaps in the mists of morning or evening! How moving to imagine the shapes of the birds reflected on moonlit paddies while you lie on your pillow listening to the tolling of a temple bell! And in a traveler's inn or the home of someone living in quiet seclusion, the sound is sure to inspire the deepest thoughts.

Some time back, I lived for a year or so in Shitaya,<sup>5</sup> involved in commerce, to my shame—selling little things in a shop to make a living. The eaves were in bad repair, but not enough to let through any moonlight, which I had only the barest glimpse of, at the edge of the second floor of the house opposite. One night when the autumn wind was blowing high and there was not a cloud in the sky, I went out into the street to gaze up. Thinking back to just such a night when my friends and I had met together to compose poems and ended up quietly chatting about our hopes and dreams, I was overcome with nostalgia and my eyes were filling with tears. And then, from somewhere in the distance, came the sound of a lone wild goose, calling for his lost companions. To say that I was sad at that moment simply does not suffice, for I almost despaired of life itself. What would it be like to hear those calls mixing with the sounds of a mallet striking a fulling block?<sup>6</sup> I wonder, and cannot but envy the innocence of little children running down the street chanting, "Three in a row."<sup>7</sup>

## Insect Voices

Ever smaller bloom the morning glories on the fence, and as I look at one tiny blossom, all but hidden by the leaves, I think painfully back to when they started to appear. With time, the voices of the pine crickets<sup>8</sup> and bell crickets have grown thinner, and as one waits for the morning sun while attending to their frail calls, from beside a ditch, say, or by a wall, one wonders what sadness the voices must inspire in the old or the sick, who cannot but contemplate how little time they, too, have left. The time for the first frost has not yet come, yet already the insects are failing, their voices sounding withered and worn.

The giant katydid is full of voice and of sturdy mien, but even he loses strength over time: a pattern also seen among men, amusingly. The voice of the bell cricket rings out beautifully, to the envy of other insects, whose only satisfaction comes in saying, “Ah—but his life is short.” The same is true for the pine cricket, who does not live up to the promise of his name.<sup>9</sup> For one expects the evergreen to withstand the withering on the moors, but the pine cricket fades away not long after the blossoms start falling from the bush clover. I would like to meet the person who gave him that name—who, knowing that he flourished for so short a time, must have chosen the name in the hope that it might extend his life by just a little.

One year I kept a pine cricket in a cage, taking care to protect him from dew and frost. It was when my older brother was ill in bed, however, and he so hated the sad song of crickets in the night that I thought he would sleep more easily if I let the bug out into the garden. I was worried that the cricket might call out nonetheless, but he did not, and we sadly concluded that he must have been so shocked by the cold of the dew that he lacked the strength even to cry out.

My brother passed away at the end of that very year.<sup>10</sup> Then the following year, just when I was recalling how he had died in exactly the same season, I heard, late into the night, the voice of a pine cricket—sounding just the same—from below our fence. It could not be the same cricket, I knew, but still the memories came over me, and I began to weep. How happy I would be, I thought, if like the insect, someone—not truly my brother, of course, but someone with the same voice and face—could come back to me. I would grab his sleeve and not let him go, I thought. Then my imagination got the better of me as I thought how happy my mother would be, so happy that she couldn’t speak but could only weep, and further pondered how my father would react to it all.<sup>11</sup>

The insect sang for only two nights and then must have gone somewhere else, for we never heard from him again. Even now, when I hear a pine cricket, I think of those times and feel so forlorn that I have never considered putting one in a cage again. And whenever I hear insect voices withering in the fields, I am always reminded of the one who went away.

[*Higuchi Ichiy sh*, ed. Wada Yoshie, *Nihon kindai bungaku zensh* 8 (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1970)]

## Notes

1. The essays first appeared in a supplement of the *Yomiuri shimbun* in the autumn of 1895, and only in May 1896 were they put together as an ensemble.
2. At the time, Ichiy was living in the Hong district of Tokyo, one area of which was called Nishikata-machi.
3. Ichiy’s brother, Sentar, had died in 1887.
4. An old Chinese story asserted that wild geese were used as messengers.
5. For nine months, beginning in the summer of 1893, Ichiy and her mother and siblings had made a go at trade with a small sundries shop in Rysenji, in the Shitaya district of Tokyo.
6. *Kinuta*. In autumn, it was the custom to clean robes with a wooden hammer and fulling block, a scene that is the subject of many classical poems.
7. A children’s song about wild geese flying by in rows.
8. *Matsumushi*. “Pining” crickets. The word *matsu* (pine) is a homophone of the verb that means “to wait.”
9. In other words, who does not wait (*matsu*) long to die. The pine was a conventional symbol of longevity.
10. He had died in late December 1887.
11. Ichiy’s father, Noriyoshi, had died in the summer of 1889.